

## EAST END VISIT, 11TH NOVEMBER 1995

Inner city locations are not the customary habitat of regional furniture enthusiasts, but our November visit to the East End of London will surely become a precedent for others to follow.

Our day began at the Geffrye Museum, where we were received by David Dewing. After outlining the history and development of the building from an 18th century hospital to a 20th century museum, David took us through the sequence of historic room settings which are presently undergoing re-evaluation and reconstruction. Even for those already familiar with the museum there was much new material here and, more importantly, new thinking. Under David's guidance the museum is becoming both more intelligible and historically more accurate, and we look forward to the early completion of the new 18th and 19th century rooms. For many, the highlight of the visit was the Evelyn Cabinet, one of several owned by the diarist and courtier Sir John Evelyn. It was a cabinet on stand of conventional French form, purchased by Evelyn in Paris in 1652. The sombre exterior of ebony veneers and ripple mouldings was relieved by incised floral designs; the interior cupboard was richly inlaid with parquetry of ivory and *bois des indes*.

Lunch was taken in a meeting room where, a decade ago, this Society held its first Annual General Meeting. Here David spoke of the ambitious plans for an extension to the museum, with galleries and exhibition space offering opportunities for contemporary makers. In the Geffrye Museum the future of British furniture making is as important as its past.

Our next stop was the parish church of St Leonard's Shoreditch, designed by George Dance in 1738. Like many of the London churches, St Leonard's had seen better days, but it has in Paul Turp a vicar determined to preserve and improve the fabric of his church. There was much here to interest us; a fine carved oak and inlaid pulpit, still with its sounding board, but now reduced from gallery to floor level; a mahogany altar table, probably installed in the 1740s, with vitruvian scroll frieze, cabriole legs and claw feet (this had been extended in the 19th century); two oak dole cupboards of c.1745, architecturally conceived with pilasters and pediment, the doors curiously pierced with a zigzag

pattern; a splendid clock on the front of the gallery, with exuberant rococo surround within a Kentian painted and gilt frame. The highlight of the church was undoubtedly the mahogany-cased organ by Richard Bridge, installed in 1757. This extraordinary baroque creation has survived both bombing and electrification, and is still regularly played.

From Shoreditch we walked on to Spitalfields, an area whose many-layered, many-cultured history is apparent in every brick and cobble of its fabric. These early 18th century houses are remarkable survivals, many of them still with their weaving lofts. There would be fewer of them if it were not for the work of the Spitalfields Trust, whose director, Andrew Byrne, we met in house in an adjacent street. Here we entered an early Georgian house, and passing through to where the garden once was, found ourselves in a 19th century synagogue, in regular use up to the 1950s but now derelict. It was a fascinating, but for this writer at least, a very sombre experience.

Our penultimate call was on Hawksmoor's religious masterpiece, Christchurch Spitalfields. The church has been closed to worshippers and the public for some years, and the interior had been reduced to a sorry state by a combination of Victorian improvements and 20th century neglect. It is now in the care of the Friends of Christchurch Spitalfields, of whom Michael Gillingham, our guide, was a member. The Friends intend to make good the depredations of Victorian improvers and return the church to its former baroque splendour. Here was another organ by Bridge, this time encased in walnut and installed in 1735. By this date Hawksmoor was an ill man (he died early the following year), which was probably just as well, since the organ was crudely inserted into the west arcade, where its pipes erupt through the entablature as if heading for orbit.

We ended our day with tea at Michael's home, a few doors away in Fournier Street. The house was built in 1726 for Marmaduke Smith, a carpenter/builder and associate of Thomas Ripley, better known for his role as Walpole's clerk of works at Houghton Hall. Michael has lovingly restored this house, removing Victorian and later accretions to produce a home of rare originality and charm. Its most notable feature is a solid mahogany staircase, remarkable at this early date, but what chiefly struck me was Michael's rapport with his furniture. Each chair, chest or table was an old friend, with a character of its own and usually with a story to tell. His scholarship was obvious, but informed with an affection which infused the whole house. Seldom have we visited a house where we felt so immediately at home and seldom, I suspect, have we been so reluctant to leave.

Many thanks are due to Christopher Claxton Stevens, who organised and led the day, to David Dewing, Paul Turp and Michael Gillingham.